

Nevada in the market for education chief

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Nevada is looking for a state public schools chief to push forward with education reforms sought by Gov. Brian Sandoval and approved by lawmakers in the 2011 legislative session.

Keith Rheault, Nevada's superintendent of public instruction since 2004, is retiring in early April and Sandoval wants to have a new schools chief to take over the Department of Education by then.

Dale Erquiaga, senior adviser to Sandoval, said in a press briefing that the selection of a new leader of the state public school system is a critical initiative for the governor but that he is staying out of the search.

Sandoval has not asked Michelle Rhee, the founder and CEO of the education advocacy group StudentsFirst, to apply for the position, he said. Rhee, the former head of the Washington, D.C., school system, was invited and attended Sandoval's State of the State address in January.

"The governor is asking no one to apply, no one in our office will speak to applicants, the governor has no predetermined outcome," Erquiaga said. "I will say though the governor recognizes it is potentially the most important appointment he will make during his time in office.

"Superintendent searches around the country at the state level and district level sometimes fail because there are not enough applicants," he said. "So the better pool of applicants we have the better off all of our kids will be."

Florida had difficulty recruiting a state schools chief earlier this year because of a lack of qualified candidates. A new chief was finally selected and took over in July.

The Nevada position is posted and open to qualified applicants through Dec. 30. It pays about \$121,785 a year plus benefits.

As a result of the education reform legislation, Sandoval now has the authority to appoint the schools chief. In the past the 10-member board of education, all of whom are elected in districts statewide, had the authority to select the superintendent.

Erquiaga said the governor would like to have at least six candidates to interview in a public process. Three candidates would then be forwarded to Sandoval for his consideration for an appointment by March.

The new legislation also changes the way the state board is selected but Erquiaga said those changes won't come until January 2013, which is why the search process is being done now with the current board. Sandoval wants a new superintendent in place well in advance of the 2013 legislative session, he said.

The new board as established in Senate Bill 197 will have four elected members, one from each of the state's congressional districts, one member appointed by Sandoval and one member each selected by the Senate majority leader and Assembly speaker. There will also be four non-voting members appointed by the governor representing different public education interests.

Sandoval and lawmakers agreed to a number of education reforms in the 2011 session, including a new teacher evaluation process to ensure the best educators remain in the classroom.